

MICHAEL

CRICHTON

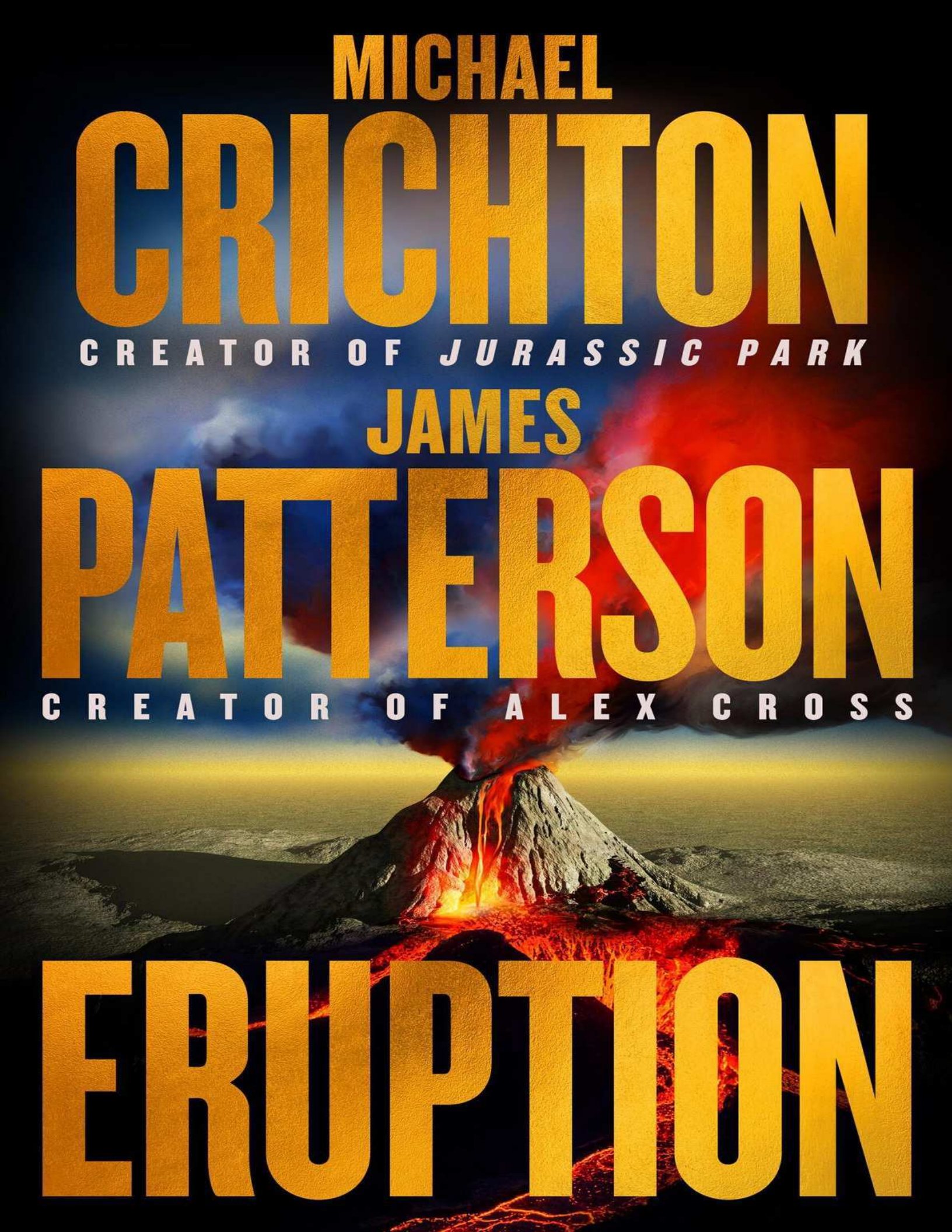
CREATOR OF *JURASSIC PARK*

JAMES

PATTERSON

CREATOR OF ALEX CROSS

ERUPTION



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MICHAEL CRICHTON
AND
JAMES PATTERSON



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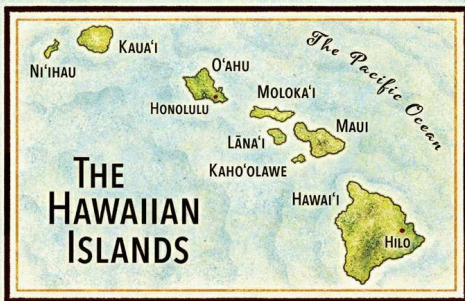
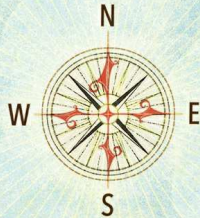
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THE BIG ISLAND OF HAWAI'I



*E ko Hawai‘i pono‘ī:
No ‘oukou i ho‘ola‘a ‘ia a‘e ai kēia mo‘olelo, no ka
lāhuikanaka o ka pae ‘āina e kaulana nei.*

To Hawai‘i’s own:
This story is dedicated to you, the people of the famed
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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

PROLOGUE

This early part of the larger story about the volcanic eruption of Mauna Loa became classified information days after it happened in 2016 at the Hilo Botanical Gardens. It remained highly classified until recently.

ONE

Hilo, Hawai‘i
March 28, 2016

Rachel Sherrill, thirty years old in a few days, master’s degree from Stanford in conservation biology, rising star in her world, still thought of herself as the smartest kid in the class. *Just about any class.*

But today at the Hilo Botanical Gardens, she was trying to be the cool substitute teacher for a restless, wide-eyed bunch of fifth-graders visiting from the mainland.

“Let’s face it, Rachel,” the general manager of the botanical gardens, Theo Nakamura, had said to her early that morning. “Taking these undersized tourists around is a way for you to put your immaturity to good use.”

“Are you saying I act like a ten-year-old?”

“On a good day,” Theo said.

Theo was the fearless academic who had hired her when the park opened last year. As young as Rachel was—and looked—she was very good at what she did, which was serve as the park’s chief plant biologist. It was a plum job, and she loved it.

And to be honest, one of her favorite parts of the job was conducting tours for kids.

That morning’s walk in the park was with some very lucky and well-heeled schoolkids who had traveled all the way here from Convent and Stuart Hall in San Francisco. Rachel was trying to entertain and educate the kids about the natural world surrounding them.

But as much as she wanted to lecture about what they were observing—orchid gardens; soaring bamboos; coconut palms; jackfruit trees; edible plants like breadfruit, kukui, and red pineapple; dueling hundred-foot-high

waterfalls; hibiscus literally everywhere—Rachel had to compete for the children’s attention with the two closest of the five volcanoes on the Big Island: Mauna Loa, the largest active volcano in the world, and Mauna Kea, which hadn’t erupted in more than four thousand years.

These city kids clearly considered the twin peaks the highlight of their tour, the best sight they’d seen in the picture-postcard wonderland called Hawai‘i. What kid wouldn’t give anything to watch Mauna Loa erupt and spew out a stream of lava heated to over a thousand degrees?

Rachel was explaining that Hawai‘i’s volcanic soil was one of the reasons why there was so much natural beauty on the island, a PowerPoint example of the good that had come out of past eruptions, helping Hawai‘i grow beans that produced coffee as delicious as any in the world.

“But the volcanoes aren’t going to explode today, are they?” a little girl asked, her large brown eyes pinned to the twin peaks.

“If they even *think* about it,” Rachel said, “we’re going to build a dome over them like we do with those new football stadiums. We’ll see how they like *that* next time they try to blow off a little steam.”

No response. Crickets. Pacific field crickets, to be exact. Rachel smiled. Sometimes she couldn’t help herself.

“What kind of coffee comes from here?” another straight A–student type asked.

“Starbucks,” Rachel said.

This time they laughed. *One in a row*, Rachel thought. *Don’t forget to tip your waiters.*

But not all the kids were laughing.

“Why is this tree turning black, Ms. Sherrill?” an inquisitive boy with wire-rimmed glasses sliding down his nose called out.

Christopher had wandered away from the group and was standing in front of a small grove of banyan trees about thirty yards across the lawn.

In the next instant, they all heard the jolting crash of what sounded like distant thunder. Rachel wondered, the way newcomers to Hawai‘i always wondered, *Is a big storm coming or is this the start of an eruption?*

As most of the children stared up at the sky, Rachel hurried over to the studious, bespectacled boy who was looking at the banyan trees with a concerned expression on his face.

“Now, Christopher,” Rachel said when she got to him, “you know I

promised to answer every last one of your questions—”

The rest of what she'd been about to say collapsed in her throat. She saw what Christopher was seeing—she just couldn't believe her eyes.

It wasn't just that the three banyan trees closest to her had turned black. Rachel could actually see inky, pimped blackness spreading like an oil spill, some terrible stain, except that the darkness was climbing *up* the trees. It was like some sort of upside-down lava flow from one of the volcanoes, but the lava was defying gravity, not to mention everything Rachel Sherrill knew about plant and tree diseases.

Maybe she wasn't the smartest kid in the class after all.

TWO

“What the shit—” Rachel began, then stopped herself, realizing that a fragile ten-year-old was standing right next to her.

She bent low to the ground and saw suspicious dark spots leading up to the tree, like the tracks of some mythical round-footed animal. Rachel knelt down and felt the spots. The grass wasn’t moist. Actually, the blades felt like the bristles on a wire brush.

None of the blackness had been here yesterday.

She touched the bark of another infected tree. It flaked and turned to dust. She jerked her hand away and saw what looked like a black ink stain on her fingers.

“These trees must have gotten sick,” she said. It was the best she could offer young Christopher. She tried another joke. “I might have to send them all home from school today.”

The boy didn’t laugh.

Even though it was still technically morning, Rachel announced that they were breaking for lunch.

“But it’s too early for lunch,” the girl with big brown eyes said.

“Not on San Francisco time, it’s not,” Rachel said.

As she ushered the kids back to the main building, her mind raced to come up with possible explanations for what she’d just witnessed. But nothing made sense. Rachel had never seen or read about anything like this. It wasn’t the result of the vampire bugs that could eat away at banyan trees if left unchecked. Or of Roundup, the herbicide that the groundskeepers used overzealously on the thirty acres of park that stretched all the way to Hilo Bay. Rachel had always considered herbicides a necessary evil—like first dates.

This was something else. Something dark, maybe even dangerous, a

mystery she had to solve.

When the children were in the cafeteria, Rachel ran to her office. She checked in with her boss, then made a phone call to Ted Murray, an ex-boyfriend at Stanford who had recommended her for this job and convinced her to take it and who now worked for the Army Corps of Engineers at the Military Reserve.

“We might have a thing here,” Rachel told him.

“A *thing*?” Murray said. “God, you scientists with your fancy words.”

She explained what she had seen, knowing she was talking too quickly, her words falling over each other as they came spilling out of her mouth.

“On it,” Murray said. “I’ll get some people out there as soon as I can. And don’t panic. I’m sure there’s a good reason for this... *thing*.”

“Ted, you know I don’t scare very easily.”

“Tell me about it,” Murray said. “I know from my own personal experience that you’re the one usually doing the scaring.”

She hung up, knowing she *was* scared, the worst fear of all for her: *not knowing*. While the children continued noisily eating lunch, she put on the running shoes she kept under her desk and ran all the way back to the banyan grove.

There were more blackened trees when she got there, the stain creeping up from distinctive aerial roots that stretched out like gnarled gray fingers.

Rachel Sherrill tentatively touched one of the trees. It felt like a hot stove. She checked her fingertips to make sure she hadn’t singed them.

Ted Murray had said he would send some of his people to investigate as soon as he could assemble a crew. Rachel ran back to the lunchroom and collected her group of fifth-graders from San Francisco. No need for anybody to panic. Not yet, anyway.

Their last stop was a miniature rainforest far from the banyan grove. The tour felt endless to her, but when it was finally over, Rachel said, “I hope you all come back someday.”

A thin reed of a girl asked, “Are you going to get a doctor for the sick trees?”

“I’m about to do that right now,” Rachel said.

She turned around and once again jogged back toward the banyan trees. She felt as if the entire day had exploded around her, like one of the volcanoes in the distance.

THREE

A voice came crackling over the loudspeakers—Rachel Sherrill’s boss, Theo Nakamura, telling visitors to evacuate the botanical gardens immediately.

“This is not a drill,” Theo said. “This is for the safety of everyone on the grounds. That includes all park personnel. Everyone, please, out of the park.”

Within seconds, park visitors started coming at Rachel hard. The grounds were more crowded than she had thought. Mothers ran as they pushed strollers ahead of them. Children ran ahead of their parents. A teen on a bike swerved to avoid a child, went down, got up cursing, climbed back on his bike, and kept going. Smoke was suddenly everywhere.

“It could be a volcano!” Rachel heard a young woman yell.

Rachel saw two army jeeps parked outside the distant banyan grove. Another jeep roared past her; Ted Murray was at the wheel. She shouted his name but Murray, who probably couldn’t hear her over the chaos, didn’t turn around.

Murray’s jeep stopped, and soldiers jumped out. Murray directed them to form a perimeter around the entrance to the grove and ensure that the park visitors kept moving out.

Rachel ran toward the banyan grove. Another jeep pulled up in front of her and a soldier stepped out.

“You’re heading in the wrong direction,” the soldier said.

“You—you don’t understand,” she stammered. “Those—they’re my trees.”

“I don’t want to have to tell you again, ma’am.”

Rachel Sherrill heard a chopper engine; she looked up and saw a helicopter come out of the clouds from behind the twin peaks. Saw it touch down and saw its doors open. Men in hazmat suits, tanks strapped to their